

Mencken on Trial

[Joseph Epstein](#) April 1990



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—H.L. Mencken

Was H.L. Mencken an anti-Semite? This past winter the question began to seem a rhetorical one, its answer so obvious that it appeared to call for another question in reply.

Was H.L. Mencken an anti-Semite? Is the Pope Catholic? Do accordion players fancy gaudy rings? Do grizzly bears neglect to use dental floss?

For years there has been muffled talk, and some of it not so muffled, about Mencken and the Jews. The first, the most direct, the least sparing came from Charles Angoff, who was an assistant editor on Mencken's famous magazine, the *American Mercury*, and later its managing editor. In 1956, the year of Mencken's death, Angoff, who was himself Jewish, published *H.L. Mencken: A Portrait from Memory*. A chapter of nine pages in this book is given over to "The Jews," and its author's chief charge reads:

Mencken's "anti-Semitism" could be sensed better than described in words, because it was so deep-seated and so furtive and so obscured by professions of loyalty to the principles of civil liberties and to what he would call "the canons of civilized living." His anti-Semitism, in other words, was of the same kind as the anti-Semitism of Richard Strauss and Knut Hamsun and Arnold Toynbee and former President Abbott Lawrence Lowell of Harvard.

Other expressions of disquiet have been heard. Some time ago a Jewish newspaper in Baltimore, the city where Mencken was born and where he lived his entire life, ran a longish piece recording a number of less than respectful if not downright anti-Semitic-sounding remarks attributed to

Mencken. In Carl Bode's *Mencken* (1969), which remains the most ample biography, anti-Semitism does not arise as a serious issue. But in a book of 1978, *Mencken: A Study of His Thought*, by Charles A. Fecher, there appears a troubling footnote about a manila envelope of notes stowed away in the Mencken Room of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. According to Fecher, if this material were ever to become public, it could give rise to "the accusation, which [Mencken] had to face a number of times while he was living, that he was anti-Semitic." But Fecher then concludes:

Actually, and in spite of these notes, I think it safe to say that he was not, but anyone seeking to defend him from the charge would admittedly have his hands full if the prosecution were permitted to introduce the folder in evidence.

The interesting twist here is that Fecher, whose 1978 book about Mencken is almost wholly admiring, has himself now become the prosecutor. The venue of the trial is *The Diary of H.L. Mencken*, of which Fecher is the editor.¹ His prosecution is neither enthusiastic nor relentless but instead disillusioned and regretful. But it is, make no mistake, emphatic. In his introduction, after noting Mencken's strong antipathy to radio and to the journalism current in America during his later years, Fecher writes that "much more important, and infinitely less comprehensible, are his attitudes toward the

war that was raging during much of this time, toward Franklin D. Roosevelt, toward black people, and most especially toward Jews." Two pages later he reminds his readers that he had earlier sought to defend Mencken from the charge of anti-Semitism; but that was before he had seen Mencken's diary. "Today," he writes, "I would be much less ready to take such a stand. Let it be said at once, clearly and unequivocally: Mencken was an anti-Semite." Qualifications follow, but no plea for special dispensation: ". . . the ugly strain runs through these pages almost like a leitmotif, and it would have been intellectually and editorially dishonest to try to excise it and pretend it was not there." Case open.

The trial has been played fairly prominently in the press. Charles A. Fecher's own comments, along with a selection of items from the *Diary*, aroused sufficient interest to put the story of Mencken's alleged prejudice against Jews, as well as blacks, on the front pages of a number of major newspapers. The New York *Times* op-ed page, on December 13, 1989, ran two pieces on the Mencken *Diary*: one by Russell Baker, who grew up a few blocks from Mencken's Hollins Street house and who now explained that "in that setting, southwest Baltimore in the 1930's and 1940's, we were all racists and anti-Semites, and much more that now seems just as unsavory"; and a second by a journalist named Gwinn Owens, whose father comes in for some rough treatment in the *Diary* and who suggested that this book

"reveals a man who was shockingly anti-Semitic and racist, to the point where his stature as a giant of American letters may be in danger."

In a review in the daily New York *Times*, Herbert Mitgang, allowing that the offending content makes up only a small part of the *Diary* ("perhaps 1 or 2 percent"), asserted that "of course, even a few drops of midnight poison are enough to damage Mencken's reputation seriously." In the Washington *Post*, Doris Grumbach, under the title "Mencken: Just Plain Anti-Semitism," closed her generally hostile review by attacking anyone who might choose to defend the book or Mencken as possessing "an anti-Semitic sensibility." Meanwhile, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a newspaper publisher who is a member of the Oglala tribe announced that because of "the racist and sexist remarks Mencken made in his diary," he wished to return the H.L. Mencken Writing Award he had won four years earlier.

As someone who has written in an admiring way about H.L. Mencken, I took none of this as particularly good news. I am well beyond the age of expecting unblemished behavior from writers, artists, or musicians, and I am no longer even sure that I agree with George Orwell that "one has the right to expect ordinary decency even of a poet." But about H.L. Mencken, despite all his youthful bravura claims of rowdiness, there has always seemed to me something not

just essentially bourgeois but upstanding. Anti-Semitism, whatever else it is, is not upstanding.

One in what might be a small chain of keys to understanding H.L. Mencken has to do with the vast discrepancies between his public pronouncements and his private behavior. Not an uncommon phenomenon, this, especially among intellectuals and artists; in practice, it usually reveals itself through statements of the highest moral tone behind which one regularly finds behavior selfish and squalid. With Mencken, however, something like the reverse obtains. He railed against the asininity of marriage, and then, at fifty, married and lived happily with a woman who he knew was very ill and who died five years later. Against the clergy he fired away every chance he got, but he took time to help a nun with her Ph.D. dissertation on James Hunker and dined frequently with a Methodist bishop nearly all of whose views he had mocked in print. He made himself out a heavy boozier ("with a liver far beyond pills or prayer"), yet, though he imbibed his share, he regulated his drinking, never let it interfere with the prodigious amount of work he turned out, and in the end, as Churchill said of his own drinking, got more out of alcohol than alcohol got out of him. And of the Jews? Alistair Cooke once said, with only slight exaggeration, that *all* of Mencken's best friends were Jews.

Mencken wrote of Beethoven: "He is a great tragic poet, and like all great tragic poets, he is obsessed by a sense of the inscrutable meaninglessness of life." Mencken was not so much obsessed by as convinced of the inscrutable meaninglessness of life. He believed that no one knew why sin and suffering were sent into the world, what motives lay behind natural laws, why man had his present form, or who created the universe. Anyone who claimed to know the answer to any of these questions he took for a con artist. Mencken was, if a philosophical term be wanted, a laughing pessimist, who held that although we may live in the dark, that need not prevent our laughing in the dark. The laughter came, for him, from the spectacle of what he called "abounding quackeries"; a quack was anyone who claimed to penetrate the meaning of life. He felt it important to learn to laugh lest one slide down the chute of melancholy.

Mencken truly, even hugely, enjoyed the spectacle, and so long as he did, the enjoyment shone magically through his writing. A decade or so ago, I was asked to give the annual H.L. Mencken Lecture at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. (There is something like a patriotic feeling about Mencken in Baltimore; the lecture takes place on what is officially designated as Mencken Day.) In preparation for this lecture, over a five or six-week period, I read through a number of Mencken's books. I read them early in the morning and I noted an odd thing, which was that, so

pleasing was the prospect, I nearly bounded out of bed to do so. Mencken used to make fun of what he called "up lifters," but reading him seemed to uplift me greatly. And not me alone. At dinner after the lecture, I sat next to an amiable Baltimore businessman of no literary pretensions whatsoever, who happened to be the current president of the Mencken Society. "What do you get out of reading H.L. Mencken?" I recall asking him. "That's easy," he said. "He makes me happy."

The spectacle that Mencken's own performance provided was itself mightily impressive. The best account I know of it was written by Walter Lippmann, who in 1926 called Mencken "the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people," and who described him at the top of his game:

His humor is so full of animal well-being that he acts upon his public like an elixir. The wounds he inflicts heal quickly. His blows have the clean brutality of a natural phenomenon. They are directed by a warm and violent but an unusually healthy mind which is not divided, as most minds are, by envy and fear and ambition and anxiety. When you can explain the heightening effect of a spirited horse, of a swift athlete, of a dancer really in control of his own body, when you can explain why watching them you feel more alive yourself, you can

explain the quality of his influence.

Mencken achieved these effects through an alchemical distillation of superior craft, delicious wit, and utter courageousness of opinion. The first can be acquired; the second is a gift; the third may no longer have a place in American life.

Some while ago I had lunch with a man who wanted to produce a one-man show, on the model of Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight*, to be called *Mencken Alive!* A nice title, I thought, and when I asked how he had come upon it he replied that he still occasionally heard people say, when they were confronted with some fresh hypocrisy or novel piece of nonsense, if only Mencken were alive today to write about this. But in fact one wonders if Mencken would flourish among us today. Too many subjects might be out of bounds to him. Thirty-four years after his death in 1956, he might be surprised to discover that there is rather less freedom of speech than when he was alive—freedom of the kind on which he absolutely depended.

One large area now out of bounds is the ethnic subject. To it a single unwavering rule applies: If you can't say anything nice about an ethnic group, shut up. Since there is much that is not nice to say, all such talk has therefore become a form

of oral *samizdat*. One speaks among friends but one almost never writes about the ethnic subject, or remarks upon it in any public way. Given the tumult that the posthumous publication of Mencken's *Diary* has caused, perhaps one ought to say it is safest not even to remark upon it in private, to oneself.

As one who keeps a journal and has a decided taste for the ethnic subject, I cannot help wondering if I ought not clean up my own private thoughts a bit. In recent months I can think of at least two damaging entries in this line. The first runs: "Read thin (intellectually thin) book on gossip by two insane-looking Jewish sociologists in preparation for my *American Scholar* essay." And then there is this item: "Amusing conversation over the telephone with the novelist McG. Much Irish charm, Boston accent thrown in at no extra cost. Felt I wanted to bring a drink to the phone." Of course I am Jewish, and I am married to a woman whose father was Irish, which may get me off the hook here, though with the thought police coming into even greater control, possibly not. But then I am reminded that McG. (as I am calling him here) told me a story about a Jewish woman, an editor in New York, who in a book review wrote the following: "With the exception of Oscar Wilde, the Irish have never been known for their sexual prowess." The sentence so ticked him off that McG. wrote to the woman, whom he knew, wondering if it would not also be true to say that "The Jews,

too, are not especially known for their sexual prowess, with the exception of Leopold and Loeb." She never spoke to him again.

Generally the Irish, in my experience, do not exhibit too great a touchiness about ethnic jokes or even slurs. In this same conversation, when the subject of newspapers happened to come up, I mentioned that nowadays I turn directly to the obituaries. "Ah," McG, sighed, "the obituaries. We Irish refer to them as the sporting pages." I had not heard that before. If I had known him a bit better perhaps I would have asked McG. If he knew the definition of an Irish homosexual, which turns out to be an Irishman who prefers women to alcohol. I came across that in Ned Rorem's *Nantucket Diary*. It is a joke that reminds one that homosexuals might just as well be an ethnic group, since they have developed the requisite touchiness, many among them speak of themselves as if they were a single unified body, and no one is permitted to say anything critical about homosexuality in public. (I recall a reference in one of H.L. Mencken's essays of the 1920's to a moralizing minister caught in a YMCA with a boy having "non-Euclidean sex"; try that out in public today.)

I used to tell a story, which took place in my twenties, about the time I answered an ad in the *New York Times* for a house rental in Babylon, Long Island. The owner, a Mr. Mitropoulos, turned out to be almost a stage-comedy Greek: florid,

barrel-chested, thick wavy white hair beginning about an inch and a half above his eyebrows. As soon as I sat down next to him in the front seat of his 1959 Lincoln, we shook hands, he looked me in the eye, and in a thick Greek accent he asked me if I was Jewish; after I allowed that I was, he said:

“Mr. Epstein, before we begin our business dealings you should know it takes six Syrians, four Turks, and two Jews to cheat a Greek.”

I didn't, by the way, rent the house. I do occasionally tell the story, though not to everyone. I am one of those touchy Jews myself, generally on the lookout for insult, a veritable truffle dog of anti-Semitism. Reading, I espy the word *Jew* a few paragraphs ahead on the page, my mental radar begins to twirl and twitter, knives come unsheathed, torpedoes click into firing position. My response has been bred in the bone, not only from millennia of history but from growing up in the city of Chicago, where Jews were a small but prominent minority and where what one was—the phrase “ethnic affiliation” had not yet come into being—was no trivial datum. Next to the stereotyped image of the Jews, that of the Irish was almost a pleasure: a charming boozier is much to be preferred to a cunning, conniving, under the-table man, and this is putting the stereotype most politely.

Anti-Semitism has always constituted xenophobia to the highest power—and then some. It has been irresistible to fools throughout history, and not to fools alone. Among serious literary men, Dostoevsky, G.K. Chesterton, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence went for it. What, one is now forced to ask, about H.L. Mencken?

At stake is the reputation of a writer until now taken to be this country's greatest journalist, one of our most important literary critics, and an original comic talent of the highest order. If H.L. Mencken was an anti-Semite, all that is not merely diminished but perhaps, in the current atmosphere, wiped out. The reputation of an artist of the first magnitude can perhaps withstand the charge of anti-Semitism. ("... We spent the weekend at Eastbourne, visiting some friends called Schiff—very nice Jews," wrote T.S. Eliot in 1920 to his mother.) But for a writer like Mencken, whose work deals directly in assertion and strong opinion, filled with craft but without the mediation of art, the charge of anti-Semitism or any other genuinely vicious prejudice constitutes a devastating blow against him. Those of a major poet's works that are not directly marred by anti-Semitism remain beautiful. But all of Mencken's views are suddenly in deepest doubt. It would be a sadness and a serious injustice to get him wrong on this matter.

The particular charges against Mencken as they have

emerged in the reviews and stories about his *Diary* are that he was a racist as well as an anti-Semite, that he was disregarding of Hitler, and that he was more than a little nuts on the subject of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Based on a reading of the *Diary* alone, a case can be made for some of these charges. Alas for quick and simple judgments, there is more than the *Diary* to be dealt with in Mencken's vast literary production—at one point in the *Diary* he estimates that he has written more than ten million words. For example, the last column that Mencken wrote for the *Baltimore Sun* on January 1, 1939 (before resigning in disagreement over its position on Roosevelt and World War II) was titled "The Problem of the Refugees" and was a plea to save the Jews of Central Europe from Hitler. It could not have been more correct. The following passages ought to be kept in mind alongside the charges of anti-Semitism against their author:

Either we are willing to give refuge to the German Jews, or we are not willing. If the former, then here is one vote for bringing them in by the first available ships, and staking them sufficiently to set them on their feet. That is the only way we can really help them, and that is the only way we can avoid going down into history as hypocrites almost as grotesque as the English.

The initiative should be taken by the so-called Christians who are now so free with weasel words of comfort and

flattery, and so curiously stingy with practical aid. In particular, it should be taken by the political mountebanks who fill the air with hollow denunciations of Hitler, and yet never lift a hand to help an actual Jew.

These are, of course, public utterances, brave and bold ones. What Mencken wrote in his *Diary* are private utterances, which are very different, as he knew quite as well as anyone, and perhaps better than most of those who- have written about the *Diary*. It is far from clear that Mencken wanted his *Diary* published; it strikes me as clearer than not that he preferred that it never be published. When he deposited it with his other papers at the Enoch Pratt Library, Charles A. Fecher reports, he affixed a label instructing that it was "not to be put at the disposal of readers until twenty-five years after my death, and is then to be open only to students engaged in critical or historical investigation, approved after proper inquiry by the Chief Librarian." At the Pratt Library, the board of trustees decided otherwise. The material seemed to them too interesting and too valuable to be kept exclusively for the perusal of a few stray scholars, and so they sought the legal opinion of the attorney general of the State of Maryland, who in 1985 ruled that "the Library has a legal right to publish the diaries." It now begins to look as if the trustees did Mencken, or at least his reputation, a bad turn. They fed a man known for his candor into the maw of an age wishing to be known for its spirit of caring.

The circumstances under which Mencken kept his diary are worth underscoring. For one thing, he did not begin it until he was fifty years old, in 1930. The final entry is dated November 15, 1948, eight days before the stroke from which he would recover to live until January 1956, but with the cruel trick of brain damage that rendered him, most word-minded of men, unable either to read or write.

Mencken's *Diary* entries are written neither in the staccato, telegraphic mode of many diarists nor in the often rather gaudy comic style of Mencken's journalism. They are stylistically straightforward and absolutely correct. (Mencken seems never to have written an ungainly sentence.) He typed out many of the entries; some are quite long. Fecher reports that this published version of the *Diary* constitutes roughly a third of the whole. As editor, he made his selections with the intention of giving a rounded sense of Mencken's life during the eighteen years chronicled, and my sense is that he has succeeded. I assume, too, that the amount of allegedly objectionable material Fecher chose to include is roughly representative of the whole, and that there is some material of the same nature in the unpublished portions.

The years during which Mencken kept his diary were for him dark ones—years of loss and defeat. At the beginning of the

Diary, Mencken has been married only three months; he is still editor of the *American Mercury*; the Depression is under way. He will lose, first, his wife, the anniversary of whose death he often notes. ("Sara will be dead ten years tomorrow. It seems a long, long while, yet she still remains living to me, and seldom a waking hour passes that I do not think of her.") He will lose his popularity among the young, whom the Depression will drive into a left-wing radicalism that he—enemy of puritanism, of the genteel tradition, of mainstream American politicians—thought no more than another form of utopian quackery. He will watch Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, neither of which he could abide, go from strength to strength with the electorate. With the onset of World War II, and his decision no longer to write for the Baltimore *Sun* papers, he will lose his platform as a regular commentator on current events. Friends will die; the talents of other friends will dissipate. Possessed, like any true hypochondriac, of vast knowledge of his own health, he sees life as a race between his sclerotic arteries and his bum heart. He is a man approaching the end of his life alone, and feeling greatly out of synch with those around him; he does not find the world, every day and in every way, getting better and better. Quite the reverse.

If the *Diary* is dark, even at times gloomy, it is by no means uninteresting. Not the least interesting thing about it is that while Mencken was writing its often bleak entries he was

also writing the three autobiographical *volumes*—*Happy Days* (1940), *Newspaper Days* (1941), and *Heathen Days* (1943)—that are so filled with the love of life, its oddity, comedy, and richness, and that have given his readers so much pleasure. Of course, in the autobiographies he was writing about the past. It was only the present that put him off, with its insipidity, its intellectual conformity, its politics. Writing in the *Diary* about his father, a businessman who worked diligently until his death at forty-four and during that time earned enough to keep his family in comfort and saved enough to maintain it indefinitely afterward, Mencken notes: "If he were alive today he would be a member of that class of reactionaries which is execrated by all right-thinking Americans."

Demoralization over the spirit of the age was not, however, permitted to get in the way of productivity. "Looking back over a life of hard work," he writes in 1945, "I find that my only regret is that I didn't work harder." When he has bouts of bad health, his principal complaint is that he cannot sit as long at his desk as when healthy. Between the ages of sixty and sixty-five, despite a number of illnesses, he will produce no fewer than five books, including a thick supplement to his monumental *The American Language*. His correspondence is never less than heavy, and some days he receives and answers as many as 25 or 30 letters, "mainly from persons I don't know." Even though he no longer writes for the paper,

nearly every working day he goes to the offices of the Baltimore *Sun* where he continues to be paid to attend business meetings and serve as a consultant. He works on future books, some of which he eventually has to abandon. In 1943 he estimates that he has written 65,000 words in his diary alone, "the equivalent," he records graphomaniacally, "of a good-sized book." He takes it as a matter of pride that he will probably leave as complete a record of his life and times as any writer who has ever lived.

The portrait of Mencken that emerges as one works one's way through the eighteen years covered by the *Diary* is that of a man who is not only out of it but rather takes pride in being out of it. He does not drive a car. He thinks radio is aimed at imbeciles; and television, which he glimpses in the late 1940's, he is sure will be even worse. Newspapers increasingly cater to morons, not least among them the *Sun* papers in Baltimore, which "degenerate rapidly to the estate of third-rate provincial journals" and which may one day be remembered "largely and perhaps even mainly because I worked for them." (True enough, as it turns out.) The firm of Alfred A. Knopf, whose author he has long been and on whose board of directors he sits, begins to publish trashy books—specifically, in 1944, a book of prayers for soldiers and sailors. Everywhere he looks he sees institutions in

decay. Even the quality of beer has dropped off badly. "The decent pleasures of life have diminished enormously in my time," he writes in his sixty-sixth year.

Some of this might be put down to growing older. But more appears to be going on, for the bitterness of many of the entries in the *Diary* is real and cuts deep. Nothing literary about it, either, like the aristocratic crankiness of the older Henry Adams, or the late-life cut-rate Hobbesianism of Edmund Wilson. A streak of such darkness, an air of hopelessness, always ran in Mencken. As early as 1927, when he was forty-seven, in an essay titled "On Suicide," he wrote:

. . . I am conscious of no vast, overwhelming and unattainable desires. I want nothing that I can't get. But it remains my conclusion, at the gate of senility, that the whole thing is a grandiose futility, and not even amusing. The end is always a vanity, and usually a sordid one, without any noble touch of the pathetic. . . .

Later, in the *Diary*, one finds him writing, "Nine-tenths of the people who call me by telephone I don't want to talk to, and three-fourths of the people I have to take to lunch I don't want to see." Although he is inevitably the best of family men—visiting relatives, ready to pick up the tab for the nursing-home bills of a mildly senile uncle—he records that "my brother August and I, sitting by the fire in the evening, often

congratulate ourselves on the fact that we have no children, and that there is only one child in our whole immediate family." The future he envisions as endless wars in which "the boys stand a good chance of being butchered in their young manhood, and boys and girls together face a world that will be enormously more uncomfortable than the one my generation has known."

Easily the bleakest entry in the published *Diary* concerns the death of one Lillie Fortenbaugh, Mencken's neighbor for fifty years. "She was," he writes, "a complete moron and led a life of utter vacuity." He describes her days, devoted to window shopping, going to movies, listening to speeches on the radio and the "yowling of socalled news commentators." "The lives of such poor simpletons always fascinate me," he writes:

So far as I know, Lillie never did anything in all her years that was worth doing, or said anything worth hearing. . . . It is hard to think of a more placid life, and she apparently enjoyed it, but it is likewise hard to think of one more hollow. It was as insignificant, almost, as the life of her dog.

Rough stuff, but then during these years Mencken's nerves must have been rubbed raw by what he judged to be the

horrendous state of the world and by the fact that for nearly twelve years he had to live under the presidency of the man he despised more than any other in American politics and whom he more than once described as having "the Christian Science smile." Roosevelt-haters have always been abundant, but Mencken was among the most strenuous. Various reasons have been adduced for the strength of his antipathy. One has it that he never forgave Roosevelt for one-upping him decisively at the 1934 Gridiron dinner for journalists in Washington. At that dinner, Roosevelt, following Mencken, who had delivered a humorous and rather mild attack on the New Deal, read a powerful polemic against journalism that turned out to be taken from a scathing piece of Mencken's own, titled "Journalism in America." It left the audience in shock. Mencken does not mention this in his diary, but according to Fecher he swore to "get even."

Yet Mencken would have had ample reason to hate Roosevelt without requiring personal animus as a goad. He held, to begin with, that "all government, in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man," and so it followed that the less there was of government, the better all 'round. The notion that professional social workers like Harry Hopkins or the Brain Trust gathered together by Roosevelt knew what was best for the country Mencken found appalling. ("Of such sort," he wrote in 1935 in the *Baltimore Sun*, "are the young wizards who now sweat to save the plain people from the

degradations of capitalism, which is to say, from the degradations of working hard, saving their money, and paying their way.") His distrust of politicians generally was very great, and in a lecture at Columbia, "The Politician," he remarked that what got them elected was "simply their power to impress and enchant the intellectually underprivileged." Roosevelt, to his mind, gave all this an extra spin. "He was the first American to penetrate to the real depths of vulgar stupidity," Mencken wrote in his diary the day after the President's death. "He never made the mistake of overestimating the intelligence of the American mob. He was its unparalleled professor."

And on top of it all, Roosevelt was the President who led the United States into World War II. To Mencken this must have brought back the nightmarish quality of his own experience during World War I, and Roosevelt must in some ways have reminded him of Woodrow Wilson, who had "all the peculiar illusions and delusions that belong to a pedagogue gone *meshugga*." Early in World War I, before America came in on the side of the British, Mencken had written pro-German pieces for the *Sun*; these drove readers wild and caused grave problems for his editors, whose line was pro-British.

Anti-German feeling in the United States seems to have been greater during World War I than that provoked by the monstrosity of the Nazis during World War II. "I will be

very interested to hear from you how St. Louis is taking the affair . . . ,” T.S. Eliot wrote to his mother in 1917. “I can imagine the mob breaking the windows at Faust’s Restaurant, and sacking the Anheuser-Busch, and Mr. Busch giving a million dollars toward national defense.” During World War I, the German language was outlawed from many public schools, Beethoven was regularly eliminated from concert programs, sauerkraut was renamed Liberty Cabbage. Around this time, I have read, Germans and Jews in the United States who had *stein* in their last names began pronouncing it *stein*, in the hope of de-Germanizing themselves.

In this atmosphere Mencken became *persona non grata* as a journalist, and was in effect black-listed from almost all newspapers and magazines. He put his energy into writing books. But he never forgot the overheated American reaction to World War I, and this must have conditioned his own highly skeptical reaction to our entry into World War II. The hysteria induced by war, the clamp it put on criticism, the spirit of propaganda it fostered, all made him extremely edgy. His complaint against the *Sun*, which plays throughout the *Diary* during the war years, is that in reporting the war it had let its critical guard drop and was reduced to the role of cheerleader.

To suggest, however, that Mencken was pro-Hitler, as some

critics of the *Diary* have done, is calumny. Fecher does not go this far, though he does cite the paucity of references to Hitler in the diary with (one senses) eyebrows raised. Yet a diary is not a current-events course, and in fact very few entries in Mencken's *Diary* touch on the news. Mencken had a good eye for tyranny. As early as 1919 he knew that the Russian Revolution was a cheat; and in 1922 he wrote, "Communism, as the example of Russia shows, is not a fountain that gushes peace, justice, and plenty, but a sewer in which they are drowned." But partly because of his experience in World War I, and partly because of his abiding suspicion of the British, he tended at first to underplay the danger of Hitler and the Nazis. In 1936 he wrote to Theodore Dreiser, "My belief is that the Jews in this country are diligently preparing for themselves the damndest anti-Semitic movement ever heard of. . . . Hitler has driven them all crazy." About the potential of Hitler, he could not have been more wrong.

But about Hitler himself Mencken was unequivocal. In 1939 he wrote to the Yale sociologist A.G. Keller: "I dislike all of Hitler's ideas save one, and that is the idea that England should keep out of Central Europe. When it set up Czechoslovakia and Poland it made another war inevitable." To another correspondent he wrote that he was "entirely out of sympathy with the method used by Hitler to handle the Jewish question," and that he was not unaware that

"intolerable brutalities have been practiced." When the Friends of Germany, a group sympathetic to the Nazis, offered Mencken an honorary membership, he declined instantly, replying that the Nazi politicians, owing to their "extraordinary imbecility," had "destroyed at one stroke a work of rehabilitation [between Germans and Americans] that has been going on since the war, and they have made it quite impossible to set up any rational defense of their course."

In this same letter Mencken likened Hitler's speeches to those of "an imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan"—and this brings up the question of Mencken's own views of blacks. Fecher does not actually use the word "racist" to describe those views, but he does say that nothing could "erase a deeply ingrained conviction [on Mencken's part] that black people were by their very nature inferior to white." Fecher quotes Mencken referring to his housemaid as belonging "to the Afro-American race, and show[ing] many of its psychological stigmata"; and Fecher adds, Mencken "considers it unnecessary to go on and explain what these 'stigmata' are." In fact, in this particular instance Mencken makes it perfectly plain that he is referring to the woman's superstitiousness, for she does not want to touch a house key recently in the possession of another woman who had

worked for the Menckens and who had just died. Apparently, under contemporary thought control it is impermissible to suggest that an uneducated black woman of a certain time and certain place might have been superstitious (*kayn ayin horeh*). If you can't say anything nice. . . .

The most odious of racial epithets comes up once in the *Diary*, in a non-racial context, when Mencken uses the phrase "nigger in the woodpile." But Mencken was highly democratic in his mockery of all ethnic groups: Scots, Irish, Greeks, his own "Krauts" (to use a phrase he did not shy away from, either). About blacks specifically the *Diary* contains a number of items that, quite apart from their truth quotient, have been ruled out as unsayable today. For example, bemoaning the general decay of the neighborhoods surrounding his Hollins Street house, Mencken writes:

Unhappily, the low-class blacks who formed part of the wartime immigration show no sign of returning home. They find life in Baltimore much pleasanter than it was in their native wilds, and when hard times come again they will all go on the dole. The city jail is already full of them, and four or five are in the death house.

Like all interesting writers, Mencken went in for risky generalizations, to which, when possible, he preferred to give a comic twist: "Why is it as surprising to find an

unassuming and intelligent fellow among [actors] as to find a Greek without fleas," is a fair example. But what saves him is that he always judges individuals above groups and races. In the *Diary*, he notes his attempts to get the journalist George S. Schuyler, a black man, a job on a newspaper or magazine, but without success. "When I compare him to any of the dunderheads now roaring on the *Sun*," he writes, "I am sharply conscious of his enormous superiority. He is not only much more intelligent than they are; he is vastly more honest." Earlier, he recounts a visit to the house in Baltimore in which he was born and which is now in a neighborhood "that has been given over to Negroes for many years, and has steadily deteriorated" (unsayable). The block opposite has been condemned for a federal project of some kind. Meanwhile, he discovers a black man, working with a white plasterer, rehabilitating the house he, Mencken, was born in. He seemed, Mencken writes, "a very intelligent and decent fellow," adding that "in even the worst slums there are plenty of such men." But between the government project and his neighbors, he is being gouged, squeezed, sandbagged. "He is one of the forgotten men who always suffer when schemes of uplift are afoot."

As for those of "the Hebrew extraction," as my black sergeant in basic training used to refer to Jews, here the

terrain gets rather more tricky. In the published *Diary* Mencken offers no generalizations on the subject. But if someone he writes about is Jewish, he usually (but not always) mentions it. George Boas, a philosophy teacher at Johns Hopkins, is "a brisk, clever Jew," and his wife is "a French Jewess" who, though polite, "finds it hard to conceal her distrust of me as a German." In an entry Fecher does not print but which he quotes in his introduction, we are told that Mencken refers to two well-known Baltimore businessmen as "dreadful kikes." But he sometimes lets opportunities escape that no true anti-Semite would: he mentions, for example, a professional deadbeat in Baltimore named Jerome P. Fleishman, but says nothing about his being Jewish, although his name would certainly suggest it. On the other hand, the sales manager at Knopf, whose idea it was to print the trashy prayer book mentioned earlier, is named Bernard Smith, of whom Mencken comments: "What his name was before he changed it I do not know. He, too, is a Jew, and moreover, a jackass." It is possible Mencken is criticizing the man not only for his publishing practice but for his falsity in trying to hide his identity by changing his name.

Then there is the entry about the last Jew in the Maryland Club, which seems to have gotten into all the newspaper stories in which Mencken has been proclaimed an anti-Semite. Mencken was himself a member of the Maryland Club, and here he merely recounts the brief history of Jews

in the club as told to him by the club's secretary, whom he has met on the street. These seem to have been two in number: one, a man from out of town named Winter who it turns out changed his name from Winternitz and who nobody knew was Jewish until he brought his very Jewish-looking father as a guest for dinner; and the other a man named Jacob Ulman, who was married to a great-granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson and had little to do with other Jews in Baltimore. The secretary tells Mencken that after the death of Jacob Ulman the board of governors decided there would be no more Jews in the club. Mencken closes the entry with this deadpan sentence: "There is no other Jew in Baltimore who seems suitable."

What, really, is being said here? Since Mencken was quite without conventional snobbery, and since many of his friends in Baltimore were Jews, it hardly seems likely that he actually believed no Jew in Baltimore was good enough to be a member of the Maryland Club (the increasing expensiveness of which he complains about in a later entry). Is it possible he means no Jew in Baltimore is sufficiently fraudulent to divest himself of all his Jewishness and Jewish connections in order to become a member of the club—that no Jew is enough of a stuffed shirt to qualify? It is, I think, quite possible.

A "shrewd Jew" is how Mencken refers to Morris Fishbein,

editor in the 1940's of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, but he ends by saying, "and I am inclined to believe that his services to American medicine have been extremely valuable." Leonard Weinberg, a successful Baltimore attorney who came up through night school, "now represents a great many of the richer Jewish firms in Baltimore. . . . Rather curiously for a lawyer of rich employees, he has maintained a level head, and on occasion has actually represented unions. He is a highly intelligent fellow, and his observations are always sharp and sound." Mencken describes Lawrence Spivak, later known as the founder and producer of the radio and television show *Meet the Press*, as "a young Harvard Jew," then goes on to praise him as "energetic and intelligent" and to remark that "since he became business manager of the *American Mercury* he has increased the advertising revenues, and shown his capacity in other directions."

Once in the *Diary* Mencken substitutes the word "Jews" for Hollywood, and another time he refers to "the Jews of Hollywood"—as in "The Jews of Hollywood have certainly not given [Dreiser] much money"—yet in the 1930's and 1940's, that was not an inaccurate sociological description. He remarks of Charles Angoff that "like most of the other young Jewish intellectuals (but unlike Lawrence Spivak), Angoff inclines to Communism. . . ." And he adds: "Angoff is an excellent managing editor, but his writings remain

unimpressive, and his politics are mainly silly." That is certainly a correct appraisal of Angoff's talent as a writer; everything about his Mencken book feels wrong and sounds false—and the general sense that the book conveys is that of a man working off a deep grudge against his subject.

What about the connection Mencken draws between "most of the other young Jewish intellectuals" and Communism? The line was written in 1934, and Jews, especially in New York City, were in fact going in for sectarian Communism in disproportionate numbers. In the *Diary*, Mencken plays on this quite frequently. After a lecture, confronted by hostile questions, he notes that most of the radicals questioning him are Jewish. The unionists causing trouble at the firm of Alfred A. Knopf are also noted as Jewish. Of *PM*, the radical New York newspaper of the 1940's, Mencken writes: "It is simply a Yiddish paper printed in English." Does all this constitute anti-Semitism? Or have we once again hit upon another of those unspeakable subjects?

Would a serious anti-Semite note, disapprovingly, the anti-Semitism of others? Mencken does, when in the *Diary* he remarks that Dreiser "broke out into an anti-Semitic tirade" against his publisher (Horace Liveright), or that Gerald L.K. Smith "is preparing to get aboard the great anti-Semitic movement now rolling in New York [in 1937]." Mencken also reports Samuel Eliot Morison, the Harvard historian, telling

him in 1942 that his students, in Mencken's words, "were mainly Jews, and that few of them showed any capacity."

But more decisive—perhaps most decisive—is the fact that, though greatly opposed to the, conduct of World War II, and though detesting Franklin Delano Roosevelt, not once does Mencken blame American entry into the war on the Jews or Jewish pressure groups or on Jewish dealings *sub rosa*. For any sort of earnest anti-Semite, especially one in as generally dark and depressed a state as Mencken was during these years, one would think the temptation to accuse the Jews would have been irresistible. Mencken, at least in those portions of the diary Fecher has chosen to print, resists—completely.

And so, as one runs through the thirty or so references to Jews in the 463 pages of the published *Diary*, one is somewhat surprised, after the news paper stories, to discover what the fuss has been about. If it is about adjectives, anyone who looks beyond them—beyond what I call the newspaper level of truth—will be disappointed. Mencken, as Lawrence Spivak recently told the writer Sheldon Richman, "talked about Jews the way Jews talked about Jews." Which, one is inclined to add, may be part of the problem.

But let us call this little inquisition to a close. To reverse Charles A. Fecher, let it be said at once, clearly and unequivocally: Mencken may have been tactless, he may have been foolhardy enough to think that a man could write what he pleased in his private diary, he may have been singularly unprescient in failing to realize that what he wrote sixty years ago would be read by an age as happy in its virtue and self-righteousness as our own. But H.L. Mencken was no anti-Semite, no enemy of the Jews. For that, he would have had to be, as in a very different context he called Woodrow Wilson, and as he himself obviously was not, *meshugga*.

¹ Knopf, 476 pp., \$30.00.

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